

Howard A. Denis, Councilmember, District 1

Purchase of the Serpentine Barrens is a key success for the environment and Montgomery County

I was very pleased to take part in the announcement of the County's purchase of the Serpentine Barrens. Last week's announcement was the culmination of years of work to preserve this important environmentally sensitive property.

The 256-acre Serpentine Barrens is the largest block of privately held forest land in the county. It is the sixth natural resource site safeguarded by the County Council as part of the 2001 Legacy Open Space Master Plan and constitutes a large part of the more than 600 acres of new parks identified in the Potomac Master Plan.

There are a few facts about the Serpentine Barrens that many people may not know. The name "serpentine barrens" refers to the geological and ecological conditions that exist on the property. Geologically speaking, the light green-colored serpentine bedrock was formed many hundreds of millions of years ago beneath the early oceans. Over the eons, this rock has been pushed upwards during periods of geological upheaval.

In North America serpentine barrens are found only in three areas: California and southern Oregon, Quebec and western Newfoundland, and southeastern Pennsylvania and Maryland.

The Serpentine Barrens property in Montgomery is home to about 22 species of rare and threatened plants and is part of the Potomac watershed. Nutrient poor, the shallow soil in the serpentine barrens - only 12-18 inches deep - creates an ecology that is home to many species of rare and endangered plants. Trees in the serpentine barrens are stunted, even though many of them are more than 100 years old, because they cannot extend their roots downward.

With these factors in mind, the Serpentine Barrens was extremely important to me and the Council to protect. I believe this purchase demonstrates Montgomery County's continuing efforts to preserve environmentally sensitive land -- if the property had not been purchased, it most likely could have been developed.

I also believe the acquisition of the Serpentine Barrens would not have been possible without the support of the community and the Planning Board and their staff who worked hard to make this important priority a reality.